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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Social Networks and Learner Persistence in Adult Secondary Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Holly Rodriquez

Committee in Charge:

University of California, San Diego
Carolyn Huie Hofstetter, Chair
Alan Daly

California State University, San Marcos
Gilbert Valadez

2018

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Chair

University of California San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

2018

Dedication

To my son, Jacob,

My sweetheart, my inspiration.

To my husband, John,

My love, my O.N.O.

To Anna and Jackie,

My classmates, my friends.

Thank you all.

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Vita

Educational Degrees

2018 University of California San Diego
California State University, San Marcos
Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership

2012 Western Governors University
Master of Education, Instructional Design

2008 California State University, San Marcos
Bachelor of Arts, History

Credentials

2010 San Diego County Office of Education
Adult Designated Subjects Credential

Professional Experience

2018 Tenured Professor, San Diego Continuing Education

2014 Associate Professor/Department Chair, San Diego Continuing Education

2008 Adjunct Instructor/Department Chair, San Diego Continuing Education

2006 Literacy AmeriCorps Member, San Diego Council on Literacy

Publications

Rodriquez, H. (2012). *Math Remediation Holds Key to College Success.* Unpublished master's thesis, Western Governors University.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Social Networks and Learner Persistence in Adult Secondary Education

by

Holly Rodriquez

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego 2018
California State University, San Marcos, 2018

Carolyn Huie Hofstetter, Chair

Much research has been done on student performance in K-12 and higher education, but historically adult students enrolled in Adult Basic and Secondary Education (ABE/ASE) programs have received little attention from educational researchers. With over one million national ABE/ASE participants every year, this is a critical population that warrants an empirical eye (National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016). Given that these students experience 25% attrition within the first three weeks of participation, low learner persistence is considered in the literature to be amongst the most significant phenomena in adult education impacting student success (Beder, 1991; Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999; Merriam & Cafferella, 1999; Merriam, 2001; Quigley & Uhland, 2000; Gopalakrishnan, 2008; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013).

One key factor that impacts adult learner persistence is relationships (Hunter, 2006). Students with stronger support systems are able to seek help as needed, lessening the likelihood

of attrition. Relational data, explored through social network analysis, could provide a unique perspective on how relationships and student outcomes are interdependent. While this research is relatively new in adult education, it has gained popularity in the K-16 system in recent years (Bruun & Brewe, 2013; Blansky, 2013; Grunspan, 2014).

This qualitative study investigated the impact of adult secondary education students' social networks on learner persistence, as measured by course completion. A sample of 14 adult secondary education students (18 years or older) were purposefully selected from an adult high school program in Southeast San Diego. The sample included students from diverse racial/ethnic, economic, and physical backgrounds. Students participated in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews providing feedback on relationships that have helped them persist in the program. Limitations of the study, such as generalizability and positionality, were also discussed.

Key findings of the study highlighted mechanisms within the program that addressed the conceptual framework of social capital as it promotes student persistence. The first dimension, structural social capital, centered on the structure of the sample network, yielding four main groups that supported adult secondary education student persistence: Counselors, Peers, Teachers, and Family. The data suggest that each group offered unique support to students in varying forms of emotional, motivational, and academic support (addressing the other two dimensions of social capital - cognitive and relational). Limitations of the study, as well as implications for practice, are also discussed.

Keywords: Adult Secondary Education; Persistence; Social Capital Theory; Social Network Analysis; Program Design; Acceleration; Learning Communities

Chapter One: Introduction

High school graduation rates are at record highs, yet nearly 7% of all public school students in the United States do not graduate (National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016). Among this subpopulation, a steady divide exists between underrepresented minority students, specifically Latino and African-American students, and their white counterparts. For this subset of individuals who do not complete high school, employment and education opportunities are often limited. United States Department of Education statistics (2016) highlight marked decreased employability among 20-24 year olds lacking a high school diploma. Compared to young adults with a high school diploma, those without a diploma or equivalency are 13% less likely to be employed (National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016). As a result, many later return to adult education programs to improve basic skills and complete the requirements for a high school diploma or equivalency certificate.

Over one million participants each year enroll in state-administered adult basic or secondary education programs for a variety of reasons: to improve their literacy skills (Cronen et al., 2015), complete a high school diploma (USDOE, 2016), and to develop relationships with key institutional agents that can help assist in building social capital (Taylor, et al., 2011); ultimately, offering these students a second-chance, so to speak, in opening doors to higher education and better work opportunities (National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2012, Table 507.20).

Adult education students fall into one of three categories: adult basic education, adult secondary education, or English as a second language (ESL). The first category, Adult Basic Education (ABE), represents the lowest academic strata, K-8th grade level equivalent. Students participating in programs at this level work on math and reading remediation, preparing to

advance to the next level. The second category, Adult Secondary Education (ASE), is composed of “low” (9th-10th grade level equivalent) and “high” levels (11th and 12th grade level equivalent). Students have two options when participating in the ASE level; they can either prepare for a High School Equivalency (HSE) test, such as the GED or HiSET, or they can work towards completing high school credits towards their high school diploma. The third category, English as a Second Language (ESL), is composed of a six-level progression from beginning literacy to advanced. In 2014, the national aggregate of adult learners totaled 1.5 million, with 172,000 working towards a high school diploma - otherwise known as adult secondary education students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2015).

California is home to the largest population of adult education students (including ABE, ASE, and ESL), comprising 13% of the nation’s adult students. Students participating in the ESL Program make up 27% nationally, and 60% in California. Despite the state’s large adult education population, it has seen a steady decrease in enrollment over the last six years (attributed to the budget crisis that resulted in a decrease in state funding). Reflecting the diversity of the state and geographic proximity, California’s adult learners are primarily Latino (64%). The second largest category is Asian (16%). In California, the majority of adult learners are female (55%), and nearly half of all adult students fall in the 25-44 age range (CASAS: California Annual Performance Report, 2015-16).

With such an amorphous student population, it is not surprising that the adult secondary education system has struggled with consistency in structure, policy, and practice. Due to this lack of continuity, one of the biggest problems in adult education is students persisting until they have reached their educational goal of obtaining a high school diploma. In 2014, only 44% of adult secondary education students (those working towards completing a high school diploma or

equivalency) met their goal (CASAS: California Annual Performance Report, 2014). The statistics would suggest that there is still room for improvement, but in order to improve, practitioners and researchers alike, must understand the problem.

Statement of the Problem

Learner persistence in adult education programs is a critical problem across the nation. Adult education has a history of high attrition. From 2009-2012, the National Reporting System exhibited a 58% annual average of high school completion by adult education students, and an even less (42%) educational attainment by level across the national ABE/ASE population (Annual Report to Congress, 2015, Table ES-1). The *revolving door syndrome* that has taken over adult education can be traced back to the days in which funding was tied to average class size (ACS). Accountability was not based on student outcomes or benchmarks, but merely how many hours of student attendance each week. Therefore, new students on waiting lists, quickly replaced students that dropped out; enrollment was much like a revolving door.

With recent legislation like Assembly Bill 86 (a two-year, $25 million state apportionment to develop the Adult Education Consortium Program), the genesis of the Adult Education Block Grant (the state apportioned $500 million for "expanding and improving the adult education system), funding has been tied to individual student progress instead of average class size (Adult Education Block Grant, 2016). While the lens of accountability has shifted at the policy level, actual changes in practices lag behind and low learner persistence has continued to suffer.

The achievement gap in K-12 has been a point of growing contention throughout the years, but it has not focused on student persistence, as secondary education is compulsory for minors. Adult learners, on the other hand, are on their own accord with regards to program

attendance. Low learner persistence is negatively correlated with success (as measured in grade-level equivalent progress in literacy or math, or the completion of course certificates). In fact, only 40% of annual adult education (AE) students achieve a one level educational gain in literacy, which is equivalent to two years in the K-12 educational system (United States Dept. of Education, 2015).

In an effort to understand the driving forces that impact learner persistence, scholars and practitioners have focused on demographics of the adult learner; however, research suggests that participants in Adult Basic Education (grade level equivalent 1-8) and Adult Secondary Education (grade level equivalent 9-12) programs vary widely. Adult education students take many forms and represent a wide range of social, economic and racial backgrounds. These individuals possess a variety of educational goals, family obligations and work responsibilities, and levels of academic preparedness (Szelenyi, 2001).

Beyond age and ethnic demographics, many adult education students have one or more forms of disability that could qualify them for additional classroom support. Many of these students were identified in the K-12 system and received supports; however, the adult education system diverges from K-12 in that students are not sought out and followed-up with; the onus shifts to the student to self-identify with the adult education disability support services program. For a student new to adult education, this process can be intimidating and difficult to navigate.

The wide variation in student academic abilities, as well as the considerable work/life responsibilities of adult learners, has been mirrored in the loose structure of most adult education programs. Until recently, most adult education programs typically operated on an open-entry/exit enrollment model, which allowed students to come and go to class as they pleased. The independent study model, resting on the andragogical theory that learners are self-directed (a

concept formalized by Malcolm Knowles), lent itself well to this type of program structure. An unintended consequence of the independent study model was a marked learner persistence problem across the nation in adult education programs (Beder, 1991; Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999; Comings, 2009; Merriam, 2001, Quigley & Uhland, 2000).

Scholars in the field argue that there are different *pathways to persistence*. As a result, the definition of persistence has contentiously evolved over time. Early literature from the 1980s took a definitive approach by denoting students as *dropouts* when they ceased to attend class. However, as researchers began to interview those students that separated, they found that, in many cases, independent learning was still occurring; therefore, the definition of persistence was broadened to include *stopouts* – those who separated for a short time – but continued to study out of the classroom – and later returned to their AE program. In the context of non-credit adult basic and secondary education learner persistence has most recently been defined by the intensity (hours of instruction in a week) and duration (the number of months a student engages in learning) of a student's classroom attendance (Comings, 2009; Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013). In credit-based high school diploma programs (as in the case of this proposal), course completion is a common indicator to quantify student persistence.

Across the broad spectrum of adult education, low learner persistence is generally attributed to one of four categories of barriers: situational, dispositional, motivational, and institutional. The chapter two-literature review seeks to take a deeper look surrounding the arguments behind each category of barriers, as well as identify research-based strategies that have been shown to increase learner persistence in adult education. Because there exists a promising precedent in K-16 research - a student's position in a network can be correlated to academic success - AE researchers and practitioners can build on the social network analysis

foundation by applying it to an adult education context. Demonstrating the important role that relationships play with regards to student outcomes could inform program design in adult education, resulting in a stronger support network for students and ultimately addressing the phenomenon of low student persistence (Bruun & Brewe, 2013). Finally, the literature review highlighted social capital as a theoretical framework for this research study, and social network analysis as a research methodology. Social network analysis has evolved from foundational graph theory to a legitimized mathematically based approach to exploring relationships of individuals in the context of a designated community. These 'hidden' patterns in a classroom context can be empirically identified offering the social science community a systematic analysis of inextricably linked interactions to outcomes.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the interplay among social networks and learner persistence in adult secondary education. Data were collected through qualitative interviews of adult secondary education students in one of the largest adult education programs in California, and focused on a subsample of students selected based on their participation in the "Adult High School Program" (AHSP). The information they provided with regards to demographics, as well as meaningful on-campus relationships, served as a lens into what the social ties characteristics of support networks look like. This study may hold the potential to inform ASE program design on a macro level by exploring a model program (in terms of student persistence) at the micro level (a local San Diego adult education institution).

Research Questions

By utilizing a network analysis design, this qualitative study explored the following research questions:

1. What social ties (e.g. peers, teachers, counselors, family) support adult secondary education (ASE) student persistence?

2. Does the adult secondary education (ASE) network vary by specific characteristics of the students (e.g. low-income, minority, or some combination of these characteristics)?

3. What is the structure (e.g. size and density) of the social network among adult secondary education (ASE) students?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized social capital theory as a framework to guide the social network analysis. The power of social capital is not to be underestimated, as sociologist James S. Coleman (1988) highlights, "like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (p. 98). Coleman, an early researcher of social capital, was the first to utilize the conceptual framework in the context of education, where he found that the social structure with which individuals are situated in, can serve as a resource in their educational setting and beyond. Putnam further expanded on Coleman's research to focus on the 'networks of reciprocity' that encouraged trust among individuals (Taylor, et al., 2011).

Coleman's emphasis on the social capital benefits of 'close ties' negated the importance of weaker ties (which also play a critical role for an individual to acquire new information), eventually leading to researcher Lin (2001) to evolve the conceptual framework into a theoretical framework. Lin defined social capital as "the resources embedded in a social network, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks," clearly providing a link between social capital and social networks (p. 49). His foundational research offered three clearly delineated components of social capital through a network lens. This research has been tied to

various Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports (Taylor et al., 2011), along with international research highlighting the importance of social capital to the adult learning process (Balatti & Falk, 2002; Baron, Field & Schuller, 2000).

Social capital is intertwined with the adult learning process through identity formation and the benefits of new social relationships that provide exposure to norms and values that will benefit the greater community (Field & Schuller, 1997; Balatti & Falk, 2002). For many adult education students, social capital can hold the key to unlocking the opportunistic information channels that may help them succeed in completing their high school diploma, and eventually, succeeding in higher education.

Research Methodology

This study took a *qualitative research design* to explore how social ties impact student persistence (Creswell, 2012; Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Carolan (2014) defines the social network structure as the "the structure of relations and the implications this structure has on individual or group behavior attitudes" (p. 7). Pivoting from the individual to a broader, interrelated-group perspective emphasizes the importance of network structure as it relates to patterns of behavior between actors. *Purposeful sampling* resulted in participants originating in an adult secondary education program in a large continuing education program in southern California (Creswell, 2012).

Specifically, the study sought to garner 25 ASE student participants in the Adult High School Program (AHSP); however, reached saturation after interviewing 14 students. The AHSP is unique as an adult secondary education program because the program design centers on learning communities rather than the traditional independent study format. With this program design, students are placed in 6-week accelerated, subject-based cohorts. Students work closely

with one another over the 6-week session due to the concentrated study time (3 hours per day, 4 days per week). They also interact with a designated counselor on a weekly basis. Exploring the individual network of AHSP students will provide insight into how the network structure interacts with student support systems.

In order to provide a more complete understanding of the network, interviews were conducted. These semi-structured interviews of 14 students provided a personal narrative discussing the nature of their relationships with regards to their persistence in the AHSP program. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to complete a diagram of concentric circles indicating the most important relationships that have impacted their persistence within the program; both internal (such as those with teachers, counselors, and classmates) and external (such as those with parents, siblings, and significant others) relationships were explored.

Significance of Study

A number of factors impact adult learner persistence, including the composition of a student's support network. The diversity and quality of relationships, both in their academic program and outside of the classroom play a role (Grunspan et al., 2014). Understanding student needs in the context of social networks can offer institutions a lens into how to allocate budget and personnel to best meet the needs of students. Oftentimes, budgets, support service assignments, and program design are developed in silos, with little consideration to maximizing the strength of a student's network. Increasing exposure to key institutional agents including teachers, teacher's aides, counselors, disability/resource support, and college outreach representatives is critical to shaping a student success network. Furthermore, creating an interaction-rich environment, in which students have the ability to work closely in a cohort-style

learning community, enables students to share a common purpose, improve communication skills through collaborative projects, and build mutually supportive bonds that aide in persistence. Gaining insight into these classroom networks could enable more adult education programs to shift from the traditional independent learning model to a more supportive, relationship-based system that could dramatically improve learner persistence.

Organization of Study

Chapter one discusses a rationale for the investigation of adult student persistence in adult secondary education. Further exploration of the current problem that exists for this population reveals elements of program design that impact persistence, and is further conceptualized using social capital theory. Chapter two consists of the current body of literature on learner persistence in adult education, including what is currently known surrounding internal and external barriers to persistence, as well as a section on why social networks are important to minimizing barriers to persistence. Chapter three describes the proposed study's methodology and design, and discusses limitations. Chapter four discusses the coding procedure utilized and reports the findings of the qualitative interviews. Finally, chapter five discusses the significance of the findings as they relate to the research questions, as well as future implications.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In an effort to understand why some adult learners persist while others do not, researchers have sought to explore all of the forces that affect an adult learner in their quest to continue their education. Literature addresses the phenomenon of learner persistence by citing two definitive categories of barriers: external and internal. The first section of this chapter provides an understanding of the elements comprising each category. The second section discusses the literature surrounding strategies to increase learner persistence in adult education. The third section explores the relationships that support student persistence, including a review of social capital theory and social network analysis.

Although literature related to adult education is scant compared to its K-12 and higher education counterparts, it is nonetheless an important population to study due to the one and a half million participants each year. Of those, nearly 200,000 students annually participate in the adult education system, specifically to satisfy their secondary education (high school diploma or equivalency) requirements (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). For this unique population of students, juggling education with personal responsibilities like work and family, a dynamic program that can offer accelerated options, rigorous curriculum, a high expectational climate, and supportive instruction can help reinforce student persistence. According to Taylor, et al. (2011), it isn't enough for adult students to merely develop academic skills. If they want to experience transformative, lifelong learning that will grow their social capital, they must learn to develop relationships in the classroom and the in broader context of their community. This begins with developing trust in one's peers, teachers and staff members, as well as learning the acceptable norms of the situation (in this case, educational setting). Halpern (2005) asserts that, once this is accomplished, social capital will grow through "cooperative action among

individuals and communities" (p. 39). Studies show a significant link between student persistence (like completing one's high school diploma) and growing one's social capital with increased economic opportunities and productivity (OECD, 2001; Balatti & Falk, 2002; National Center of Education Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2016). In order to realize increased student persistence though, stakeholders in adult education must understand potential barriers to student success.

Barriers of Adult Education

External Barriers

Scholars describe external barriers as influences outside of the individual's control that impact one's educational achievement (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). External barriers include the subcategories of *situational* and *institutional*. In the context of adult education, situational barriers include personal barriers that inhibit one's ability to regularly attend and succeed in an adult education program. Some examples include unreliable transportation, an unstable living environment, and an inability to find childcare during class time. Institutional barriers include those that are controlled by the educational institution, but still inhibit a student's ability to regularly attend and succeed in an adult education program. Some examples of institutional barriers include an unclear counseling in-take process, limited class offerings, and inflexible counselor appointments. These types of barriers are expanded below.

Situational. Early research examining low learner persistence in adult education often centered on the impact of situational barriers on student learning. This research conducted in the 1970s-80s was often based on assumptions rather than empirical research. Furthermore, it was often misguided by a deficit mindset - one that faults the students for their lack of success. Rather than taking a more comprehensive look, practitioners and researchers alike narrowed their

focus to include only one element of a complex web of factors affecting persistence. They often highlighted the fact that adult education students have to contend with work obligations, transportation issues, and familial obligations like childcare, health issues, and financial demands. As research evolved, it implied understanding of these factors, but sought to explore the degree to which they impact learner persistence.

Research on situational barriers in adult education began to gain traction in the 1990s. It began to improve both in quantity and quality, especially with the inception of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) in 1996. This organization – offering a diverse composition of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers – worked in concert to increase access nationalize and publicize their findings as they relate to adult education. Each arm of the organization focused on one important element affecting adult education learner success. The arm devoted to studying learner persistence was responsible for the publication and dissemination of learner persistence studies on a national scope (Comings, 2007).

Many of the studies coming out of NCSALL during the late 1990s – early 2000s recognized the existence of situational barriers to adult education students, but sought to assign a degree of influence in learner persistence. Therefore, it was not uncommon for the research during this time to rest on theoretical frameworks taken from the sociology field, such as Lewin's (1951) force-field analysis. Although seemingly dated, the model seemed apt in providing a framework to study the variability level of influence situational factors had on adult education student persistence. In this context, the variability level analyzes each factor that plays a role in an adult education student's persistence – some factors may be negative or positive –

and some factors may have a higher degree of negativity or positivity. The ultimate goal is to adjust the forces as needed to find balance (Louis & Gordon, 2006).

Finding balance has often been a struggle; even the research in this area has been at odds. A landmark NCSALL-supported study cited that nearly half of adult education attrition occurs because of situational factors (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999). However, a later qualitative study in which 25% of the original one hundred-fifty participants dropped out of their respective General Education Development (GED) program in the first four months found that a student's background (gender and ethnicity) and current situation (employment status and children in the household) did not strongly affect learner persistence (Comings, 2007). The findings suggested that the positive forces (relationships, goals, and teacher) outweighed the negative or situational forces (life demands).

To completely dismiss the role that life demands can play would be imprudent. Certainly, adult learners must contend with work and family responsibilities. Compounding the aforementioned with the responsibilities that accompany formal education requires some degree of balance; without it, the impending result could be a lapse in school attendance. Research cites the importance of recognizing situational barriers that do exist, but taking a proactive approach to managing the positive and negative forces that impede persistence (Comings, 2007). In other words, shifting the mindset from deficit to equity-based, has allowed researchers to see learner persistence as part of a complex web of factors (attributes of both student and adult education systems), not merely a reduction of singular attributes of the student's situational status. With this in mind, understanding the barriers created and perpetuated by institutions, may uncover solutions to improve persistence.

Institutional. When examining the role that institutions play as external barriers to adult education persistence, the research highlights several theoretical models. One primary model takes its roots from the biological sciences, specifically, the branch of ecology. The nature versus nurture argument is prevalent in the field and it is commonly accepted that there is a complex interplay between biology, environment, and behavior. Likewise, systems theory – as applied to the adult education context – visualizes the institution as an environment, capable of influencing study behavior to the point of success (persistence) or at the other extreme, attrition (Alhassan, 2012). The adult education institution functions like a system, with many working parts. A variety of components at the institutional level can impact a student's ability to persist. The scope is broad, ranging from the degree of bureaucracy involved with the intake/assessment process, the structure of the program, the rigor and relevance of curriculum, the effectiveness of the teacher, and the relationship with key institutional agents of support, such as counseling.

Literature suggests program structure as one institutional factor in adult education that greatly affects persistence (Gopalakrishnan, 2008; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). In response to early assumptions that adult learners had many situational barriers that prevented them from attending a structured program, many adult education programs offered (and still do) flexible program options, characterized by open enrollment and lax attendance requirements. A recent longitudinal study examined three adult secondary completion programs in the state of Connecticut: the General Educational Development (GED) preparatory program, the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), and the Adult High School Credit Diploma Program (AHSCDP). Specifically, the comparative study analyzed the retention and graduation rates across the three program options, from 2003-2007. The findings suggested that the stronger the institutional supports (in this case the Credit Diploma Program) and the more structured the

program (clear program course progression/requirements, managed attendance/enrollment, and increased counselor support) – the better the persistence and graduation rates (Gopalakrishnan, 2008). A briefing paper commissioned by the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education provides qualitative data from practitioners from several different states highlighting consensus in the benefits of managed enrollment on learner persistence, as well as managed intake (Povenmire, 2006).

Only recently has the counseling intake process become a commonly discussed institutional factor with regards to learner persistence. There is a history of inconsistent practices and program structures with respect to intake. Some adult education programs would have one person wearing multiple hats – that of intake and guidance counselor, as well as instructor/facilitator. In other (larger) programs, a counselor might be charged with supporting multiple programs, which includes intake, follow-up, and orientations. In both of these scenarios, the student may or may not experience a welcoming reception and clearly articulated pathway. This lack of support and/or clarity can translate to students' failure to show up on the first day of class, or to attend only briefly (Quigley, 1995; Comings et al., 1999). Furthermore, the design of the intake process can play a critical role in addressing a participant's situational and dispositional barriers, ultimately impacting student attendance (Hubble, 2000). Interventions, such as intake surveys, goal setting strategies, and one-on-one appointments with counselors can positively impact student persistence, as well as completion rate (Hubble, 2000; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). The research suggests a positive correlation to more structured and personalized approaches in the intake process as a mechanism for increased adult education persistence.

Further research echoes the importance of the intake process to identify students that exhibit *at-risk indicators*, such as behavioral and attitudinal cues including overt hostility, uncertainty, and negativity (Quigley & Khune, 1997). The intake process serves a dual purpose in 1) identifying students that display *at-risk indicators* and may need unique supports/interventions, and 2) an early alert system for counselors to relay to teachers the need for additional in-class support.

After an adult education student experiences the intake process, the next challenge is committing to attend the first class. As Quigley (1998) reiterated, the first three weeks are critical to adult education student persistence; therefore, the learner's experience in the classroom at the onset plays a critical role in their willingness to return. With this consideration, another institutional factor that highlighted in the literature is teacher effectiveness – a broad term which includes everything from teaching strategies and engaging curriculum to *teacher immediacy* (to be discussed in more depth in the next section as it relates to dispositional barriers).

Internal Barriers

Internal barriers, on the other hand, are generally those reflecting personal attitudes about one's self-efficacy (ability to learn), and are subcategorized as the closely related, *dispositional* and *motivational*. Dispositional barriers are internal perceptions that inhibit a student's ability to attend and progress in an adult education program. These perceptions are often a result of years of negative experiences in an academic setting, and heavily influence a student's belief regarding self-worth and efficacy. These powerful perceptions can impact a student's ability to establish a healthy rapport with fellow students, as well as key institutional agents, such as counselors and teachers, that serve as a much-needed support system in adult education. Without an internal belief of one's ability to succeed, as well as lack of an external support system, student

motivation (which serves as a stimulus to student success) is compromised. The link between motivation and educational success has been explored for years; however, it is still relatively new in the adult education setting.

Dispositional. Research suggests that institutional supports (such as supportive and personalized intake-processes) are often a response to dispositional barriers. In the context of adult education, dispositional factors are generally defined as a student's current attitudes toward education that have been shaped by one's previous educational experience. Most adult education students, for example, have a school record characterized by low grades and/or inconsistent attendance. They often report having been bullied or felt discriminated against by a teacher. To put this in context, participants involved in adult education programs often have difficulty overcoming poor self-esteem and self-efficacy because of perceptions shaped by their K-12 experience (Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992).

In addition to past educational experiences, the role of the ABE/ASE teacher may influence a student's likelihood to persist in an adult education program, especially if their potential attrition is due to dispositional factors. One element that can affect a student's decision to discontinue classes could be the perceived rapport of the student-teacher relationship. The degree to which a teacher positively intervenes when a student is struggling is known as *teacher immediacy*. Literature cites teacher immediacy, an interpersonal relationship between teacher and student that can either hold positive or negative impacts, as having a clear impact on learner persistence (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005; Mazer, 2013). A newly created set of instruments, the Student Interest Scale and Student Engagement Scale, was utilized with a sample of undergraduate students to demonstrate the degree that teacher communication behaviors (both

verbal and non-verbal) impact student motivation (Mazer, 2013). Findings supported a link between teacher communication behaviors (immediacy) and student interest.

Teacher immediacy research as it relates directly to adult education students is limited, but an early study explored the role that teachers played in the separation of students from their adult education program. Respondents from that study indicated that they did not vocalize their concerns directly with their teacher before separating. Most did speak with their intake counselor, but expressed a discomfort with communicating directly with their teacher. Furthermore, those students that did persist were identified as comfortable speaking directly with their teacher and rarely seeking out support from their counselor (Quigley, 1998). Because there is a gap in teacher immediacy research in the adult education context, but a close link between teacher communication behaviors and student interest and engagement in higher education, there may be precedent for some specialized research in this area – specifically with a lens on student persistence in an adult education setting.

Better understanding how emotion and learning are interconnected may help narrow the gap. The ability of a teacher to appropriately and effectively communicate with students is referred to as *communication competence* (Titsworth, Quinlan, & Mazer, 2010). The degree of communication competence is often left to student perception; however, research indicates that when students perceive a supportive tone in teacher communication, both student emotional engagement, or *affective learning*, and outcomes increase (Mazer & Hunt, 2008). Likewise, when student perceive an unsupportive or negative communication from the teacher, an emotional detachment occurs, and students may separate from the teacher, class or program (Glaser-Zikuda & Fuss, 2008; Titsworth et al., 2010).

Motivational. The discussion of motivation in adult education literature has evolved over the years. Inspired by the deficit-minded principles that drove the adult education field early on were the assumptions that adult education students lacked motivation needed to succeed academically. As the field evolved and research took a more empirical bent, scholars began to assert that adult education students possessed all the motivation that was needed to succeed upon entrance into an instructional program; however, that motivation could be minimized or derailed at the onset of demotivators, such as an uninspiring teacher (Garrison, 1997; Beder, 1999). Eventually, the discussion on motivation found itself relying on Pintrich and Schunk's (2002) social-cognitive theory of motivation – delineating three primary categories that influence motivation 1) intrinsic motivation 2) self-efficacy, and 3) goal orientation. Within adult education research, self-efficacy has emerged as a focus largely because it has been commonly deemed as a predictor for academic persistence (Wiggfield & Eccles, 2000).

Developing an internal confidence of academic ability or self-efficacy as an adult education student can be difficult, as it is not uncommon for adult education students to experience low self-esteem as a result of dropping out of high school or from other dispositional attributes. O'Neill and Thomson (2013) posit that self-efficacy is to some degree malleable, and can be influenced by external forces. Similar in concept is Attribution Theory, which suggests that the way in which a learner perceives causes for specific results (such as a high test score might be perceived to be a result of a study session), may be indicative of learner self-perception (and by extension, efficacy); ultimately impacting learner motivation (Mellard et al., 2013). Further investigating this link between dispositional barriers, low self-efficacy, and motivation, a 2013 study utilized a retrospective design to distinguish the relationship between two variables 1) educational level gain based on the USDE's National Reporting System's (NRS), and 2) goal-

directed thinking based on the Hope Scale. Two important findings emerged from the study that relate to learner persistence, 1) learners who received more help were more likely to have higher attendance, and 2) learners who perceived fewer internal barriers were more likely to have higher attendance (Mellard et al., 2013) – evidence of a direct relationship between dispositional factors and learner persistence.

The perception of internal barriers coupled with the impact of external barriers can shake a fragile perception of self-efficacy. However, as AE students realize self-identified goals, begin to identify positive attributions, and build self-esteem, self-efficacy can be developed into a more concrete *self-concept* (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). It is this stronger sense of self that transforms internal motivation into persistence.

Strategies for Increasing Persistence

In order to improve student persistence and help students in adult education meet their defined goals, a comprehensive approach that considers each of the categories of barriers must be taken. While some strategies have been suggested from practitioners and researchers specifically from within the adult education field, expanding the lens to include current research in higher education could offer practical solutions. Higher education often shares similar interests with the adult basic and secondary education community in that many students in community college are placing at a remedial level equivalent to that of ABE/ASE students. Within their own research they have found connections between lower placement in remedial math and English courses to higher attrition (Hern, 2010). With increased emphasis on student equity in higher education, comes a vast amount of research on instructional practices, as well as more comprehensive support services.

Expectational climate. In order to increase adult education persistence, institutions must create an environment for success. Tinto and Pusser (2006) refer to this environment as an *expectational climate*, and assert that three elements are needed: support, feedback, and involvement. Just as students bring certain attributes to the learning experience, so does an educational institution – depending on what the institution brings, can significantly impact the student's learning experience one way or the other.

With regards to support, institutions must be cognizant of both academic and non-academic needs. Academically, students need to be fully engaged in the learning process. The traditional adult education model of independent learning and flexible scheduling implied a minimal amount of student engagement with both instructors and fellow classmates. Several components help to create a more engaging classroom atmosphere, including positive teacher communication behaviors that offer clarity, access to rigorous and relevant curriculum, frequent progress monitoring, and clear expectations (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Brown & Skow, 2009; Finn & Schrodt, 2012).

Non-academic supports can be found within the realm of student support services. Students need to be welcomed in a non-threatening, supportive manner in a way that gives students the necessary tools to clearly articulate a pathway towards an achievable goal. Learning communities are also helpful in this regard. Also referred to as cohorts in higher education, learning communities refer to groups of students placed in specific thematic courses for an extended period of time (generally two consecutive classes). Studies on learning communities have shown promising quantitative data highlighting increases in first and second year retention of students participating in learning communities, as well as qualitative data similarly supporting

an increase in persistence based on a shared learning experience and increased peer-to-peer connections (Basic Skills Initiative, 2009; Finn & Schrodt, 2012).

Acceleration. One area gaining traction is acceleration. Statewide initiatives supporting acceleration, specifically in basic skills, have cropped up across the nation. The California Acceleration Project (CAP), for example, has adopted acceleration as a model of best practices and offers promising results to increase student persistence and success. These best practices include revising placement procedures to include multiple measures. This gives students more of a chance of placing in a higher-level class with extra support – thus, increasing the likelihood of success. Curriculum revision is also a key element to CAP's success. Among the 61 colleges that participate in the program, many have embraced the backward design approach that incorporates basic skills remediation into higher-level math and English classes, and have further reported increased student engagement (Hern & Snell, 2013).

Accelerating the pathway for students to succeed is only one component of a system of supports. Literature highlights the importance of academic and non-academic advising as a means to increasing persistence (McDonnell, Soricone, & Sheen, 2014). The counselor serves a critical role in establishing a positive and supportive environment from the initial point of contact with the student to the conclusion of the academic pathway. Their role can range from assisting the student in identifying a clearly articulated academic goal, to providing ongoing progress monitoring. Though tasked with playing multiple roles, studies show a link between comprehensive counseling programs that are data-driven in their organization plan to higher student attendance (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

Recognizing the strong correlation between retention and student support services, the state of California has taken a policy approach by enacting the Student Success Initiative (Harris,

2014). This initiative included a directive from the governor to build in a comprehensive student support services plan into each of the California community college's strategic plan. The initiative, which focuses on 22 best practices to support student success, could serve as a model for the adult education system.

The aforementioned, recently adopted strategies and initiatives to support student persistence are a strong first step in combating attrition in both adult secondary education and higher education. Although research in adult education has been limited, lessons may be learned from how social networks and social capital have been generated in K-12 and higher education settings, specifically as they relate to student outcomes (Bruun & Brewe, 2013; Blansky, 2013; Skahill, 2002).

Social Capital

Social capital as a conceptual framework is credited to the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1986), who introduced it as an arm (along with its counterparts economic and cultural capital) of *field theory.* Conceptualizing society as multi-dimensional in nature, made up of sub-spaces (work, home, and school), allows one to visualize the overlap of an individual's fields. *Habitus*, Bourdieu contended in his book *The Forms of Capital* (1986), is the real and potential resources one brings to each sub-space (*field*), but can be a combination of inherited or developed social, economic, or cultural capital. As an individual acquires more experience through social interaction, one is able to better understand the norms of a situation. Bourdieu referred to this as *doxa,* and found it critical in developing all three forms of capital.

The *fields* that Bourdieu popularized later developed into what is today known as *networks*. Putnam, a political scientist out of Harvard, was the first to explicitly state that "social capital is about networks," but also about reciprocity and trust between individuals (2000, p.

171). Throughout the years, the conceptual theory of social capital has evolved to a theory with broad implications applicable to the world of academia and student success networks (Lin, 2008).

Developing one's network rests on the substantive understanding of one's own identity, but also of the common norms and values of a setting. The ability to develop an *academic identity*, coupled with a *sense of belonging*, is critical to student success (Jensen & Jetten, 2015). The lack of social capital at the onset of an educational endeavor, whether in higher education or adult secondary education, can negatively impact a student's ability to successfully persist through an academic program. Research has shown that underrepresented, minority students are at a disadvantage before they even begin their academic program, largely due to the lack of social capital derived from the family (Simmons, 2011). Navigating the social and cultural norms of a classroom or university can be daunting enough for a well-prepared student, but when coupled with a muted sense of belonging and an underdeveloped professional or academic identity, the likelihood of persisting is minimal.

Because adult education has a large proportion of underrepresented, minority students, one can infer that they are unlikely to persist given the research the aforementioned research that links low social capital with low student outcomes. However, this is not necessarily the case due to the flexible nature of social capital - it is not static, so there is always a possibility of developing it. Positive interaction among peers (generally a result of learning communities) can help *bond* social capital. Bonding social capital occurs when relationships between individuals allow for the development of a perceived shared identity among participants (Jetten et al., 2014). Strong ties between actors and strong social support characterize the interactions in these types of networks. On the other hand, *bridging* social capital can include interactions to outside of the

concentrated group, but generally has weaker ties. As Portes (1998) contended, weaker ties offer an access point for new knowledge and resources. Understanding the composition of adult education networks may help identify ways to increase social capital, specifically for underrepresented students who may be deficient due to family background or a lack of academic identity.

Social Networks

An individual's network is made up of various relationships, both in and outside of the classroom. Daly (2010) notes that, "a network is a group of actors who are connected to one another through a set of different relations or ties" (p. 4). Within the school network, there are a variety of potential actors that could impact adult secondary education persistence, ranging from classmates, teachers and resource support to counselors, administration, and college outreach. As Putnam (1995) asserted, social capital plays an important role in student achievement (including persistence) because it helps to establish trust. While students of low socio-economic backgrounds (representative of many in adult education) tend to have strong family relationships, they tend to lack strong relationships to institutional agents that can provide guidance and support in an educational setting. These institutional agents help to provide a positive trajectory from early childhood education, well into the college years.

Adult secondary education students from low socio-economic backgrounds may already be disadvantaged, and without access to social capital, are unable to build a supportive network to help them succeed in education. Because social capital is not an individual characteristic, but rather is dependent on a "property of networks...through which individuals can access resources," the structure of an organization can dictate the degree of student access to said resources (Shojie, 2014, p. 601). Key institutional agents such as counselors can establish

trusting relationships that often result in increased social capital for students (Museus & Neville, 2012). While McKillip, Rawls and Barry (2012) agree that counselors play an integral role in providing valuable insight and support when helping students navigate the college entrance process, they also highlight institutional factors that can inhibit a counselor's ability to be effective.

Counselors are not the only institutional agents that may be limited by organizational structures. Researchers Spina and Stanton-Salazar (2008) emphasize the need for training to develop mentorship roles, but highlight that training must incorporate a practical approach to effectively communicating and building trust with students that bring a challenging history of guarded behavior. Regardless of one's position in a network, relationships are predicated on trust. Without this component, students may exhibit an extreme response to their education, as evidenced in high attrition rates.

Social network analysis (SNA) rests on the premise that one's position in a network can dictate one's access to opportunities, and even predict student success. Since the early 2000s, SNA research has seen correlations of network position to student performance. A 2002 higher-education study, found that students with a larger network of school-involved peers subsequently had a higher level of academic success in comparison to those with a smaller network of school-involved peers (Skahill). More recent studies, but those focused on high school students, have found a positive correlation between a student's friendship network and GPA (Blansky, 2013; Bruun & Brewe, 2013).

All of the aforementioned studies build on Lin's (2001) network theory of social capital, in which he cites three critical components for social capital: s*tructural positions, network*

locations, and purposes of action. Despite Lin's workplace context, his principles are transferable and have been applied to an educational setting.

While SNA research in adult education is scarce, the evidence from K-12 and higher education supports the assertion that network composition and network structure have a significant effect on student performance, and ultimately, could extend to persistence. Network *composition* refers to the individuals to whom one is directly tied that can provide information, support, positive influence, or other relevant resources. Network *structure* refers to the location one occupies in a social structure that may provide some kind of advantage, such as increased trust or better access to information. A 2008 study, for example, found that when network composition and network structure interact, there is a significant joint effect on strengthening community in schools (Maroulis & Gomez). Further research, stretching across grade levels and departments, cites the position of the individual in one's network as impactful in academic outcomes. In a 2013 STEM study, researchers Bruun and Brewe found that physics students' network position is correlated with their academic performance. Furthermore, a separate K-12 study found there to be a positive connection between a student's network at school and their academic achievement, as measured by friendship network and GPA (Blansky, 2013). This research, although based in K-16 systems, offers transferability to adult education settings, and suggests the importance of understanding each program's social network as a guide to increase student's social capital, as well as academic outcomes.

Summary

The world of adult education is complex, as are the variables that influence persistence and attrition. In order to improve learner persistence in adult basic and secondary education programs, one must consider the external and internal barriers not discretely, but with

consideration to the interplay that exists between them. In order to accomplish this, research supports the need for a federally sponsored, qualitative, longitudinal study on learner persistence. The large portion of available research was limited in that it lacked sound methodologies, and was dated from the 1990s; however, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), a federally funded research organization operating from 1996-2007, provided empirical findings surrounding learner persistence in adult education. Coupled with other reputable organizations such as Harvard University Graduate School of Education, World Education, and Rutgers University (to name a few), NCSALL published works from practitioners and scholars from nearly 40 states. Unfortunately, the NCSALL was disbanded in 2007; the result was a concentrated lack of scholarship in adult learner persistence, and more generally, adult education.

While the available research offered insight into the importance of learner persistence as it relates to educational gains, methodological limitations in the research came to light. These limitations were often noted in sampling methods, size, and variation.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The research presented in chapter 2 provided a framework surrounding the internal and external barriers, as well as the social and academic supports for adult secondary education students. It further explored social capital theory and social network analysis as a methodology to explore relational data in adult secondary education. Literature suggests a link between relationships and student success (Blansky, 2013). Chapter 3; therefore, describes how the study captured the school and family relationships of a designated sample of adult secondary education students participating in an "Adult High School Program" in southern California.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the composition of a specified adult secondary education learning community, and determine, through social network analysis, if one's individual position within a social structure had any correlation to student persistence. Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) resulted in participants that attend the Adult Secondary Education (ASE) program in San Diego Continuing Education, and more specifically, participate in the learning cohort-model, Adult High School Program. Data were analyzed to explore peer relationships, as well as meaningful relationships with key institutional figures (counselors and teachers) and family members that students have self-selected as having impacted their own persistence in the program (Spina & Stanton-Salazar, 2008). The aim of this research was to provide a foundational study on the possible relationship between social network structure in adult secondary education and student persistence. The hope is that this study will act as a springboard for future research in this area, and ultimately, inform program design in adult secondary education to increase student outcomes.

This study investigated the social ties that support student persistence in adult secondary education. A qualitative research design provided insight into the following research questions and sub-questions:

1. What social ties (e.g. peers, teachers, counselors, family) support adult secondary education (ASE) student persistence?
2. Does the adult secondary education (ASE) network vary by specific characteristics of the students (e.g. low-income, minority, or some combination of these characteristics)?
3. What is the structure (e.g. size and density) of the social network among adult secondary education (ASE) students?

Design of the Study

The study utilized a qualitative design, which offered a more substantial understanding of the structure of social networks and their relationship to persistence (Creswell, 2012). A sample of 14 AHSP daytime students were purposefully selected to participate in one-on-one interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to be to provide deep personal narratives, from a wide-range of perspectives that could discuss the nature of their relationships (student support network) with regards to their persistence in the AHSP program. An interview protocol was developed yielding 12 primary questions that allowed for participants to fully describe the various social ties that impacted their academic success (as well as offer insight into how). Participants also responded to? one diagram of concentric circles demonstrating possible social ties that served as a mechanism for participants to provide a tiered-list of individuals who have most influenced their persistence.

Research Site

The research site took place at an urban adult education campus in southeast San Diego. The campus is one of six in the district that serves approximately 45,000 students per year. The student body is demographically diverse, varying in terms of age, race, religion, nationality, ability, and career goal. Students come from all over the city of San Diego to attend free classes to improve academic and vocational skills, while often working towards a certificate, such as a high school diploma or career technical education certificate.

The research site is home to one of only two campuses in the district that offers a unique program that provides a learning cohort model. Students may attend accelerated six-week classes in a high school level subject that will then translate to credit towards a high school diploma, offered jointly through the local school district. Classes run four days a week in three-hour increments. Due to work and family obligations, many students attend one class at a time; however, some students elect to take two to three classes in the six-week session in order to further accelerate their path to completion. Due to the nature of the block schedule, students have become very familiar with each other in passing, even if they haven't yet attended the same class.

Due to increased outcomes early in the pilot stage of the "Adult High School Program" (2013), some informal data had been collected and evaluated, mostly in terms of credits obtained, and retention data. There had not yet been a formal research agenda, nor had any previous research been conducted to examine the networks that exist within the learning community or the impact on student persistence, if any, of those networks. Prior to conducting formal research, the study was properly vetted and approved through both the UCSD Institutional Review Board (IRB) and San Diego Community College District's IRB.

"Adult High School Program." The Adult High School Program began as a pilot program in Spring 2013 at a San Diego adult education campus that offers multiple programs, including a high school diploma program. Prior to the implementation of the AHSP, the traditional format included an independent study style format, with minimal student interaction with a teacher or with classmates. The class space, referred to as the Independent Learning Center, was an apt descriptor of the model of the program. After an informal needs analysis, two adjunct instructors presented a proposal and were given the green light to pilot a new model. The Adult High School Program represented a transformative shift in not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also in student and teacher attitudes towards education.

The design of the AHSP was research-based to benefit from the best practices that have been cited in recent literature. Some trademarks of the program that emerged as a result of the research include: teacher-guided accelerated six-week sessions, a subject-based cohort system, engaging curriculum with integrated technology, frequent progress monitoring (24/7 access to grades, comments, and teacher communication through *Jupitergrades* – an online platform), increased disability and support programs and services (DSPS) support, increased access to two program-specific counselors, and ongoing college-transition resource support.

The first semester of the AHSP pilot, saw a 198% increase in student credits completed (ABE/ASE Program Review, 2014). In the last two academic years, the program has seen an increase in not only course completions, but also in the number of students graduating. Data from San Diego Continuing Education, Institutional Research and Planning Office (2016) cites a 179% increase in 75-99% course completion threshold, and a 68% increase in high school diplomas awarded. The notable increase in student outcomes makes this program an opportune

model to research, both due to its unique student support network, as well as the unique student persistence outcomes in an adult secondary education program.

The AHSP varies from the typical adult secondary education program, in that it centers around learning communities versus a traditional independent study program. Research has linked learning communities to increased student participation, persistence, and outcomes (Hunter, 2006). Furthermore, learning cohorts, the cornerstone of many *first-year college programs*, serve a purposeful role in helping students learn to establish and maintain impactful interpersonal relationships (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2005). With this in mind, it is possible that the nature of the AHSP (learning community system) could influence the data collection of this study.

Participants

Purposeful sampling targeted approximately 25 current AHSP students, effectively all students actively taking classes in the daytime/afternoon Adult High School Program, less those currently enrolled in the researcher's classes. In total, fourteen students participated in the study. Three classes run simultaneously every three hours; by opening participation to several classes, students had the opportunity to identify social ties across a diverse cross-section of classes. All participants had to be at least 18 years of age; there was no upper age limit.

The sample population at the research site was predominantly Latino/a (85%), in-line with the largest ASE ethnic demographic in California (Table 1). Female students represent approximately 64% compared to their male counterparts at 36%. At least 43% of students have an identified learning disability, with countless others that have not been identified (students must voluntarily seek out support from the Disability and Support Programs and Services (DSPS) office in order to qualify; as a result of this self-selection, many students do not receive

services because of their failure to do so. All students previously attended a traditional public high school program, but for personal reasons did not complete all of the credits necessary for their diploma.

Table 1. *Comparison of Demographics (State vs. Sample)*

	ASE Students in California (%)	**ASE Students in Sample (%)**
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	256/43,164 = .5%	0/14= 0%
Asian	1,983/43,164 = 4.5%	0/14= 0%
Black or African-American	3,987/43,164 = 9.2%	2/14 = 14.2%
Hispanic or Latino	27,950/43,164 = 64.7%	12/14 = 85.7
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	194/43,164 = .4%	0/14 = 0%
White	7,875/43,164 = 18.2%	0/14 = 0%
Two or More Races	919/43,164 = 2.1%	0/14 = 0%
Age		
16-18	6,434/43,164 = 14.9%	1/14 = 7.1%
19-24	14,585/43,164 = 33.7%	7/14 = 50%
25-44	17,870/43,164 = 41.4%	5/14 = 35.7%
45-59	3,789/43,164 = 8.7%	1/14 = 7.1%
60 and older	486/43,164 = 1.1%	0/14 = 0%
Gender		
Male	24,167/43,164 = 55.9%	5/14 = 35.7%
Female	18,997/43,164 = 44.0%	9/14 = 64.2%

Source: CASAS California Annual Performance Report — July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015

Instrumentation

Interview protocol. Participants received an email invitation sent out by the San Diego Community College District (Appendix A), asking if they were interested in participating in an interview; resulting in 14 interviews conducted by the researcher. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews asked participants to expand on the nature of the relationship with their fellow students, teachers, counselors, and DSPS/TRACE support staff. The interviews took approximately one hour, and with participant permission, were audio taped and transcribed (Appendix B). Participants were offered a transcript of the interview to check and clarify any information.

Data Collection

The study followed a qualitative methods design (Creswell, 2012) and utilized semi-structured interviews to a gain a deeper understanding of the forces that intersect to provide a social support network for each individual participant. The 14 participants took part in a single, approximate 1-hour, audio-recorded interview that was then transcribed and coded to identify emerging themes. The final section of the interview consisted of a diagram of concentric circles that served as a platform for participants to indicate influential social ties, in a tiered reporting system. This platform provided the researcher an opportunity to determine the number of direct connections of the individual (*node)* to others (*alters*) that serve as academic/social support in the program, while the narrative portion of the interview allowed participants to discuss how their fellow classmates, teachers, counselors and family influenced them in certain socio-academic situations, including persistence.

Data Analysis

After a cursory read-through of each interview transcript, a concurrent analytic process took hold. First cycle coding included analytic memos written to record initial content observations based on Descriptive Coding, as well as to capture the emotion of the interviewee's responses based on In-Vivo Coding (Saldana, 2009). The process of analytic memo writing allowed me to reflect and write about the study's research questions, while also exploring and identifying patterns within the data. Furthermore, this process generated themes of notable social ties, as well as programmatic factors that positively impacted student persistence. Finally, a chart was created that housed themes, sub codes, raw data in the form of interview quotes, source and page reference from interview transcripts and significance.

Second cycle coding was informed by the three dimensions of social capital: structural, cognitive, and relational (Granovetter, 1992; Nahapiet and Goshal, 1998; Claridge, 2004). During second cycle coding, structural social capital emerged in the form of social tie categories: Peers, Teachers, Counselors, and Family. The aforementioned categories helped to define the structure of the interviewees' network in the educational setting, but also extended to outside of the institution. Focusing on the descriptive language of the participants provided insight into the shared understandings between actors, and informed the dimension of cognitive social capital. The quality and significance of these ties, specifically, with regards to trust and learner identity addressed the relational dimension of social capital.

Chapter Four: Results

This study examined the connection between adult secondary student support networks and student persistence. Through qualitative analysis, three research questions were posed to gain insight into the types of social ties existing among the sample, network variation depending on specific characteristics, and type of network structure of the social network.

Participants

Table 2: *Summary of Participant Demographics*

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	DSPS	Persistence Rate (Credits Com/ Credits Attem = %)
A	Isabelle	23	F	Latina	Y	2/2 = 100%
B	Linda	55	F	Latina	Y	14/15 = 93%
C	Raul	25	M	Latino	N	1/1 = 100%
D	Kai	27	M	African-American	N	N/A (new student)
E	Garret	25	M	Latino	N	5/5 = 100%
F	Ryan	33	M	Latino	N	N/A (new student)
G	Leticia	23	F	Latina	N	N/A (new student)
H	Yvette	23	F	Latina	N	N/A (new student)
I	Brittany	20	F	Latina	Y	2/3 = 66%
J	Jennifer	18	F	Latina	N	N/A (new student)
K	Maritza	36	F	Latina	Y	3/3 = 100%
L	Deondre	24	M	African-American	N	N/A (new student)
M	Annabelle	20	F	Latina	Y	5/5 = 100%
N	Rene	24	F	Latina	Y	N/A (new student)

The sample was comprised of 14 adult secondary education students (Table 2). All participants were attending classes towards their high school diploma requirements at the time of the interview. All students were older than 18 (the minimum age required to attend the program), with ages ranging from 18 – 55. There were 5 males and 9 females. Of the sample, 86% were Latino/a and 14% were African-American. Of the sample, 43% participate in the Disability

Support Programs and Services (DSPS) program; which requires voluntarily identifying themselves (and providing documentation of) having either one or more learning, physical or mental disability. All students have previously "dropped out" or discontinued attending traditional high school within the K-12 system. Of the 14 participants, seven were new students – enrolled in their first 6-week session in the program, and seven were continuing students – had completed at least one 6-week session. Of the continuing students, a wide representation of student persistence was represented – from as little as zero credits completed, to six at the time of the interview.

Findings

Reviewing the transcripts revealed a lens into each participant's emotional, academic journey. Interviewees were prompted to describe their first encounter with Student Services; what resulted was a whirlwind of emotions that accompanied the orientation process, and ultimately, academic journey as the participants navigated the world of adult education. Every individual expressed a deep-seeded anxiety, seemingly resulting from previous negative academic experiences and ultimately, crafting a broader theme of low self-efficacy. Participants detailed the lack of confidence and faith that they would be successful in this academic program, especially during the orientation phase. Participants recounted past academic "failures" (not passing a state-mandated reading exit exam; falling so far behind in high school credits that they were a full year behind; continually re-taking math classes because of not understanding the material), but also mentioned past academic experiences that had impacted them so tremendously, they had caused a degree of emotional trauma.

When one has experienced emotional trauma in any arena (especially a classroom), it results in guarded behavior and a perceived betrayal of trust. Students have a difficult time

building social capital when suffering from emotional trauma. They can only begin to build social capital if the environment is safe and conducive to building trusting relationships. Specific mechanisms need to be in place to help students work through trauma by establishing reciprocal trusting relationships on a number of fronts. The learning community (cohort system) presents multiple opportunities to form meaningful relationships based on a common purpose, and take the first step in overcoming past emotional trauma.

The three dimensions of social capital, structural, cognitive and relational, collectively lend themselves to student persistence. On the other hand, the absence of one or more dimensions can lead to student attrition. Interviewees identified specific AHSP mechanisms that addressed each of the dimensions, thus informing the degree of persistence among the participants.

The dimension of structural social capital was addressed by the structure of the network and included the following identified social ties: Peers, Teachers, Counselors, and Family. The dimension of cognitive social capital was discussed by participants in shared experiences of peers, as well as a common goal among faculty, staff, and students - the shared vision of students completing their diploma requirements. Cognitive social capital was influenced by the "nature and quality of relationships" (Claridge, 2004), including the degree of trust - which was indicated by interviewees in the emotional description of interaction among all actors, but specifically with student-teacher in which participants highlighted the high degree of teacher "caring." High expectations and the development of a learner identity also spoke to the relational dimension of social capital found within the AHSP.

Social Ties

Counselors

Anxiety and Attrition. One of the interview questions specifically asked interviewees about their first encounter with Student Services, including the intake process and initial appointments with counselors prior to the start of class. Interviewees generally described the start of the process with an hour and half assessment in reading and math, followed by an hour-long orientation, and finally a one-on-one meeting with a counselor for transcript evaluation and educational planning. When subjects were asked to recount the feelings of that day, the overwhelming majority reported high levels of anxiety due to an extended period away from school (this varied for each student), a high degree of self-doubt, and general uneasiness of the process (not knowing what the process entailed or what they would be required to do).

There was a pattern of increased anxiety throughout the intake process and many students stated they began to question their ability (self-efficacy), even to the point that they began to consider their place at this school. It was at this point, that many of the subjects mentioned feeling anxiety to the point of dropping out; this occurring before they even began the instructional program. Of the participants interviewed, all said they were able to push through and at least attend the first day. Many stated they were just going to "feel it out" and see how the first day of instruction went, before making a decision to continue attending or drop out. Rene, echoing a common sentiment, shined a lens into her feelings of beginning a new program, "Because I hadn't been to school in a long time, I was nervous to actually start. I didn't know if I was going to continue, like not going to be able to handle it."

This common feeling of anxiety was also a highlighted thread when subjects recounted their experiences in traditional high school. Many, short on credits from poor attendance, became overwhelmed at the prospect of being so behind in their credits and not feeling confident enough to do well in their current course load, experienced a marked shift from anxiety to attrition. In

keeping with this pattern, many students mentioned the fear of dropping out of this current program – they were worried about replicating the same experience and patterns from their previous secondary education experience. Numerous interviewees discussed a fear of not being academically prepared to do well in the current program. They expressed a feeling of inferiority and questioned their own belief in themselves to succeed. Some students discussed having trouble with reading at their last school, or not understanding the material and feeling too embarrassed to ask for help. Some interviewees not only expressed a worry of being academically unprepared, but also noted their concern of being an older student in a high school program, and their worry that they may be the oldest student there. One student noted how when she expressed her concern during her initial appointment with the counselor, she was put at ease by the counselor sharing how she too, was an older, non-traditional student that was able to succeed with her educational goals. When asked in the interviews if the subjects had ever felt so anxious that they considered dropping out of the Adult High School Program, the majority said no, less the time spent at the intake process.

Beyond the intake process, the role of the counselor often arose within the interviews as a mode of continued support throughout the educational process. Students often spoke of the overwhelmingly positive experiences they had, and the important connection they had felt with the two primary counselors assigned to the program. A couple of students noted the concern over being able to keep up in such an academically rigorous program, but said that after meeting with counselors, they felt more confident and supported to continue, noting the importance of counselor support in student persistence. One student shared an early experience of feeling uneasy with a new teacher that he described as “challenging,” but said he felt like he understood the teacher’s approach better after talking with the counselor. He further stated that once he

shifted his mindset, he was able to thrive in that class, and even came to appreciate the aforementioned teacher as one of the best he had ever had.

The social tie between student and counselor was established as a main support to student persistence in this program due to the trusting relationship that began during the intake process, but that also evolved as counselors continued to meet with the students. It seems the nature of having the same two counselors support the program over the long-term lent to an opportunity for students to become more comfortable with the counselors – comfortable enough to seek them out when they were struggling academically or questioning their ability to persist – and trusting enough to take counselor input/advice and continue on through the program.

Peers

Shared Experiences. One theme that stood out with regards to the peer-to-peer social tie was shared experiences. Interviewees often noted feeling connected and supported when hearing other students share their challenges and past experiences. Furthermore, they expressed a bonding that would occur when they too, would share their own experiences, seemingly validated by their peers' similar occurrences. This ability to connect with a peer, especially during the initial stage of the program, seemed key in promoting comfortability and contributing to persistence. One student, Kai, in recounting the anxiety he felt in the early stages of orientation, and then in class, mentioned how other students can be a motivating factor, and how he realized early on that he was not the "only one going through something." This epiphany served as a platform for motivation and also reminded him to be supportive to his fellow students. Interviewee Ryan, echoed this sentiment by expressing how he was always interested in hearing new student stories, stating that when "we help each other out...[it] motivates people to

continue and come back. Again, speaking to influential factors, Isabelle said, “everything impacts in a good way...the teachers, the students, the different stories that you hear.”

Building Community. Interviewees were very vocal about the comfortability and encouragement they have found in the community that has been built between students in the program. Echoing research on the significance of learning communities (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2005; Hunter, 2006), many interviewees described how they have found academic support in their classmates. For example, Isabelle (normally very shy) described how she was able to partner up with a girl in math, which helped her do better academically, but also enjoy class more. Outgoing interviewee, Kai, discussed how in math (“not his best subject”), he was able to connect with a classmate, “G”. Although he struggled, he was inspired by how “G” was always participating in math. “G. is a good guy...now I sit by him because I want to feed off that...and I'm understanding more.”

In addition to academic support, interviewees often described finding socio-emotional support from their classmates as well. While it is not uncommon for students to partner up and exchange numbers with one or two classmates, many interviewees described large networks of peer-to-peer support within the program. One such instance was an all-female group of seven students, spanning across three different classes, mentioned by two of the interviewees. They discussed how the group offered a sense of camaraderie within class – how it was fun to be able to learn and socialize – but, they also took a more serious tone, discussing how they had been a type of support group for each other, particularly when one was going through a divorce. 36-year old, Maritza, discussed the advice and encouragement she gained from her peer group, that motivated her to make a life-changing decision, but also to prioritize school in her new-found independence. 18-year old Jennifer spoke of how she felt a connection to the others, as they were

also mothers and facing similar challenges. Her statement of "My friends [named classmates]...get me through everything...they're supportive," seemed to sum up the importance of peer support, and classroom community, with adult education populations. The interviewees also discussed serving as a support network, as a check-in type of system. One noted the important role in persistence the group maintained; how they were the first to follow up when one of their classmates weren't in attendance, finding out why they missed, encouraging them to return, and sharing important assignments that they missed. They discussed the various methods they used to reach out – text, email, Facebook and other social media – all critical in providing a timely response (and oftentimes, much faster than a counselor would be able to reach out and follow-up). Interviewees like Maritza, seemed to appreciate this level of concern, she stated, "If I don't come, they're just asking or they'll text or something to check up and support me." Another student, Deondre, shared how impactful other students have been in the program through his educational journey, and how he tries to reciprocate the same level of support:

> I'm just really glad that I got to meet great people here through this experience. For me, it kinda helps me push forward. I think peers are the most important part of schooling, and then our teachers, cause really, it's the group that you're with you develop like a relationship, a bond with these people, and you kinda get an understanding of where they're at and where they want to go. So, whatever you can do, you try to help in your best way.

Another participant, Kai, similarly reflected on how bonding with new students has positively affected his educational experience:

> I like meeting new people because it does make it easier. It makes you settle down a little bit quicker, and the guys that I met here are great. I would have never thought I would make the relationships as fast as I'm making them, I mean, and it's cool. I could tell that they're all genuine, and it definitely it does make you want to keep coming back, too. I mean, definitely for them. In a sense, like I said, I care about people, so it's like now that I'm getting to know them, I want to see them succeed. I want to see them get to the next level. I want us all to be at that finish line at the end of the year.

This level of peer-to-peer support offers positive reinforcement to any student, but particularly to vulnerable populations, such as those in adult education settings. One interviewee discussed a history of traumatic bullying back in traditional high school, which left her defensive and closed off around classmates. While she doesn't have a large network of peers that she interacts with, she has been able to develop a meaningful relationship with one student. She recounted how she appreciated their philosophical discussions, and how those interactions keep her motivated to continue attending. In addition to students that have endured bullying, are other types of "non-traditional" students in adult secondary education. For example, Linda, a 55-year old student in the program has overcome the fear of returning to school due to her age. After realizing success within the program, thanks to the many relationships she has established while attending, she has decided that she is no longer ashamed of her age, but rather sees it as a badge of honor. She says that she wants to be an example for other mature students and inspire them to pursue their educational dreams; "If I feel that at my age I can finish high school, I would hope to encourage other people in my age group to finish if they haven't because it'll make a big difference in your life."

Teachers

Teacher Compassion. In attempting to reconcile the difference in mindset from anxious and overwhelmed traditional high school student to confident and comfortable adult student, key supports were identified that helped students persist in the AHSP. The primary theme was teacher compassion. Subjects often hinted at, but did not fully elaborate on negative experiences with past teachers from prior educational experiences (K-12); however, multiple participants discussed teacher interactions in the AHSP as accessible, supportive, and caring. These attributes underscored a link to student persistence. One student went so far to say that they had never had

teachers that cared as much as the teachers in the AHSP had. Subjects also stated that teachers want to see everyone succeed; furthermore, that subjects felt comfortable asking any of the three teachers in the center for help, even if it wasn't their lead teacher. Many of the statements made in the interviews, led one to question what types of previous interactions or relationships the subjects had with key institutional agents, and if these types of experiences in the AHSP were unique in their academic journey. The following statements provide a glimpse into how participants viewed their interactions with teachers within their current program:

> The teachers all seem to care...about their students and their success...that makes the biggest impact of all because when a student can come to the classroom and feel like they belong, that can make the greatest impact on whether a student succeeds or not. – Linda
> The teachers are great. They take the time to teach their students. At least these teachers here are actually trying to improve everybody's life. – Ryan
> I've never had teachers that helped me so much like the ones that do here. – Isabelle
> I honestly didn't expect to see the teachers care as much as they do, because this isn't the first time I've come back to a school. I did do the old school immediately after I dropped out of high school and the staff there just...Oh man, I don't know. You know when someone's there for a paycheck and when someone's there to do their job. – Raul

Expectational Climate. A common theme that emerged relative to teacher ties was in reference to the climate created within the program to pursue higher education. Interviewees cited teachers as central to instilling the confidence to transition on and continue with their education post-program, as well as seeking a "higher purpose." There were several similar statements made such as, "I used to just [want to] graduate and I would be fine with that, but now I actually want more now that I started," (Leticia) to "Now I really like school; I really want to stay in school and really do something" (Isabelle). The link to confidence was further palpable through statements such as:

> I've learned so much and I can say now that I like school. I really want to stay in school and really do something. Because you get a lot of help, a lot of help. They're [the teachers] strict about certain things, but I think that's what makes you stay here...they're giving you an opportunity to actually do something in life, you know. – Isabelle
> I haven't been this proud of myself in a long time, and I don't want to lose the feeling.– Kai
> This is a great stepping stone for me. I'm not used to finishing stuff. This is a stepping stone for me to finish something. I always quit because of my ADD. This time I'm not...I don't believe I'm going to.– Ryan

Students such as Leticia discussed not just feeling more confident academically, but also more confident in day-to-day activities, such as feeling comfortable speaking in public. The interviewee explained how, as a result of the program, she feels like she has broken out of her shell, and is comfortable being more social outside of class; that she now has the skills to contribute more substantially in conversations. The overall influence that teachers had on the interviewees is best summed up by the student, Linda, who said, "...it's really important because I think the teachers give us the confidence to continue to come back. They ask as questions...that make us think about whatever it is that we are trying to learn. The relationship that we do have with them make a great impact on the success of the student." Another interviewee, Yvette, cited how the teacher impressing the importance of next steps can serve as a motivating force for students; "I feel like in some way, with the little comments [teacher X] makes, kind of motivate me to come back. The teacher can be motivating by bringing up a lot of thinking about college and stuff like that."

Family

Driving Motivation. A common theme that emerged from the data was the social tie of family as a driving force for motivation. Many interviewees characterized this alter as an extremely significant tie (external to the educational setting) contributing to their persistence, specifically due to a strong desire to make their family proud; this ranged in responses from

parents, to siblings, to children. One interviewee in particular, 27-year old Kai, emotionally recounted the disappointment in letting his mother down when dropping out of traditional high school, but also how that disappointment had evolved into a driving motivation for him to finish, in his words, "I'm motivated because I really want to have that hat and gown and that walk across the stage, and my family cheering for me." He goes on to say how he didn't think his mom would ever see him graduate, but now he feels like it could become reality; due in large part to the support that he has found from the teachers and classmates within the program, but in large part from the support of his older brother who has been a great role model, and who has himself gone on to complete community college, and then university.

Like Kai, other interviewees expressed the strong role their family has had on them in persisting within the AHSP. At times, students expressed the importance of being a good role model for younger siblings or even their children. The interview with 23-year old, Leticia, shifted in tone from jokingly having a sibling rivalry with her younger brother, but then to a more serious statement about the desire to make both him, and her mother, proud of her by getting her high school diploma.

While making siblings and parents proud, another, common theme was inspiring their own children their educational attainment. 36-year old, Maritza, served as a prime example in sharing those that most inspire her to persist in her education. Her first and foremost influence was her autistic son, whom added a layer of import due to his special needs circumstances. She wanted to make him proud, but also wanted to continue on to college to learn more about autism, so that she would be better able to help him. Jennifer, a young, 18-year old mother who traveled from Tijuana early morning every day to attend classes in Southeast San Diego, cited the many

struggles she faced, but how she was motivated to overcome them to provide for her young daughter and be something "big" in life.

Programmatic Factors that Impacted Persistence

Acceleration. When asked if there were any other factors that impacted their persistence in the AHSP, many research participants noted the accelerated component of the program as impactful for a variety of reasons. First, interviewees discussed how the short-time frame (six weeks) goes by quickly, and motivates them to keep on top of the work. One interviewee, Jennifer, discussed how she felt about the accelerated format, "I like how it's like...you have three weeks so it kind of makes us, 'Okay, we have to get it done, we have no choice. Cause we only have the three weeks left to get it done. I think that's really, really cool about the program." Other interviewees saw the schedule as convenient "because the sessions are always every six weeks" so there were never any difficulties or barriers to starting the program (Garrett). Another interviewee even cited the schedule as one of the primary reasons she chose to attend the AHSP versus the equivalency option. Another interviewee, Raul, also stated that they specifically choose the program due to its accelerated format because time was an issue, along with work and family obligations. Once he realized how quickly he could finish his remaining 4 credits, he said the realization "really made me want to keep coming back."

Relevant curriculum. In addition to acceleration, participants noted their increase in engagement (lending to persistence) due to the relevancy of the curriculum. One participant noted that they learned a lot and found the class more interesting because the professor framed the class in a modern context. Additional participant, Yvette, added, "I like how the instructor brings up current situations and stuff like that. And it's not just what we're studying, but more relevant." 55 year-old Linda also mentioned how her participation in a variety of courses

increased her engagement outside of class, "You know, because I had Government, English, Contemporary Voices – and a lot of those classes are about things that are happening now in the world. It just made me pay more attention to things that are going on in the world, and just things that are going on in the government. I do appreciate that very much."

Increased confidence and social skills. One factor directly related to social capital that rose the surface of interviews, was the increase in the area of "soft skills." Participants discussed the increase in self-confidence as a result of their participation in the AHSP, especially as it relates to outside of the educational institution – in their personal lives. Many participants discussed how the skills learned in the program translated to more productive behaviors at home and in social settings. One participant, Linda, discussed suffering from a long history of anxiety to the point of nauseation. But, she said, she learned how to get past it by identifying it as it happens, and pushing herself to engage more – actually ask the teacher more questions. She said, this is a skill she learned in the program; a skill that has not only helped her understand that she can overcome her anxiety, but also a skill that has helped her persist in the program. She went on to discuss how the program has affected her on a personal level; "my experience here has made me...I think it's made me grow as a person, even though I'm an older student. I feel more confident."

Participant Kai noted an increase in his ability to maintain focus and feel a sense of accomplishment:

> My experience here so far has definitely been positive; it's definitely been one of good change. I'm proving to myself that I'm able to focus, that I'm able to actually go home and open up my backpack and do homework, whereas opposed to just watching TV or doing something else. Yeah, so far, my time here has just definitely been a positive one, it's been a very humbling experience knowing that it's never too late, and that I'm not the only one. I may feel old, but there's older people than me that are in class that are going through it too.

Participant Leticia had always been shy, but she said her experience in the AHSP has taught her how to be more outgoing. She credits this to her effort at speaking up a little more in class and participating a little more each day. She claims that is what helped "break her shell"...she says she speaks more with her classmates and when she goes out now, she is "actually more social." In addition to being shy, Leticia has gained a confidence in her ability to contribute on a more substantial level outside of class. She states, "I remember when I was in school and I would copy and stuff...and this time around I'm actually doing it and learning. So, like I've said before, in my outside [life], I'm actually able to leave and actually talk about things going on around the world."

Ultimately, there were three principal non-social factors that impacted persistence. The first was the acceleration component of the program. The second factor impacting persistence was the relevancy of the curriculum and the ability to contextualize it to where students found it increasingly applicable to their daily lives. And lastly, interviewees noted the vital "soft skills" that they developed and that helped them to increase their self-confidence and social skills, minimizing their anxiety and facilitating persistence.

Age

The most common characteristic discussed in the interviews was not of ethnicity or disability services eligibility, but age. Six of the fourteen students interviewed were 25 years of age, or older. These six students were the most vocal about how age was a factor in their persistence. Many expressed a hesitancy to return to school, worried that they may feel out of place with students much younger than them. This was a worry unique to this population, although they did share a similar concern with those of all ages, which was that of self-efficacy (would they be able to succeed academically in the program). Most of the concerns that were

vocalized in the interview seemed to indicate a high level of anxiety at the onset of entering the program, during the intake process. Once the interview questions shifted to experiences in the classroom, this demographic group seemed to express a high level of confidence in their abilities to be successful in the program, and furthermore, and high levels of self-motivation. Many interviewees expressed a desire to finally fulfill the life-long goal of obtaining their high school diploma.

Structure of Network

Research has shown that the structure of a student's network impacts academic success (Blansky, 2013; Bruun & Brewe, 2013). In order to gain insight into each participant's network, a diagram with concentric circles was used to allow students to document not only who influences them in the program, but to also rate those alters that are most impactful in supporting their persistence in the AHSP using a tiered system. There were 51 total responses (N=51) among the participants. Of those responses, seven categories emerged (Table 3): Teachers/Counselors, Classmates, Parents, Siblings, Spouse/Significant Other, Children, and Outside Friend. Interestingly, this rating of most impactful ties offered new insight to the role of family in the adult education experience.

Table 3: *Participant Response of Social Alters Impacting Persistence*

Category	# of Responses (n=51)	Percent
Teachers/Counselors	8/51	15.68%
Classmates	6/51	11.76%
Parents	16/51	31.37%
Siblings	8/51	15.68%
Spouse/Sig. Other	7/51	13.72%
Children	4/51	7.84%
Outside Friend	2/51	3.92%

The highest rated social alter impacting persistence was 'Parents' at 31.37%. It is unsurprising that this category would rate highly with regards to impacting student persistence generally speaking, as it is much the focus in the K-12 system; however, it is surprising given the nearly non-existent visible role parents play within an adult education context. As an adult education student, no information can be shared about a student without a release of information submission, and given the age of students (18 and up), parents generally aren't involved in any on-campus (classroom or otherwise) activities. The finding is suggesting that parents still play an impactful role in the adult education student's academic life, and as such, might be able to better support adult education students if they were included in the internal academic setting, in addition to the external home setting. While the concentric circles served a quantitative measure of impactful alters, the qualitative narrative of the interviews provide an opportunity to explore how the social alters impact adult education students. As previously mentioned in the analysis of research question #1, family serves as an incentive that motivates students to succeed; most AHSP students highlighted the need to succeed academically so that their parents would be proud of them. They also mentioned the desire to overcome past negative experiences that had impacted their parents, like not having enough credits or the grades necessary to graduate. It is possible that with further inclusion of parents in on-campus activities, students may feel increasingly more motivated to persist.

Following the highest category of parents, two categories tied for the next highest rated: Teachers/Counselors and Siblings – both at 15.68% of responses. The findings denoting Teachers/Counselors as being highly impactful echoed existing research (Spina & Stanton-Salazar, 2008). However, the finding of siblings being highly impactful to persistence was not something that came through in the existing research. In summary, the interview narratives

centered on students wanting to serve as a positive example to younger siblings, with only one exception; one student, Kai, discussed how his older brother has served as a prime example of how to overcome barriers and succeed academically (ultimately, he served as the impetus for inspiring Kai to return to school and work towards his high school diploma).

Narrative responses seemed to coincide with the concentric circle activity (rating of impactful alters on persistence), with the exception of peers. Narrative interviewee responses often highlighted the importance of peers and learning communities in the personal success of the student, and the influence on the student persisting as a result of peer support; however, findings from the concentric circle activity rated 'Peers' at only 11.8%. The reason for this disparity is unclear, but does suggest a different methodology might be more useful in measuring this component in future research.

One final note regarding structure of network was the appearance of a concentrated network of the learning community and family. In addition to the subject-based cohorts, there were only three teachers and two counselors. The only addition that participants highlighted to being impactful to their persistence in the concentrated network of the program was family. There was an absence of any mention of participation in outside associations, sports teams, or support groups, either on or off campus. This may or may not be due to the relative absence of student clubs and organizations offered in adult education (unlike traditional secondary or higher education).

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study offered valuable insight into a small sample of adult secondary education students participating in an accelerated, subject-based cohort. Participants discussed the structure of their learning network, featuring the following categories: Teachers/Counselors,

Classmates, Parents, Siblings, Spouse/Significant Other, Children, and Outside Friend. They further offered insight into the nature of the relationships, while calling attention to the ways in which each supported persistence in the program. With regards to peers, participants emphasized the importance of finding common ground through shared experiences. Subjects expressed an increased comfortability, willingness to empathize, and building of classroom community when they connected with their peers over previous educational experiences, as well as current concerns. The other social ties within the instructional program, teachers and counselors, served as both socio-emotional and academic supports. Counselors were credited with providing support in times of distress (especially during orientation, but also in ongoing appointments throughout the program), while instructors were integral in offering a caring environment, creating a high expectational climate, and helping students to build their self-efficacy and develop a learner identity. Family was cited as integral in providing student motivation.

A primary theme of anxiety emerged as one of the strongest influences of possible attrition. Participants cited anxiety stemming from two sub-themes: low self-efficacy and concerns over age. Low self-efficacy was a concern from the onset of the program, seemingly at its highest intensity during the intake process, but diminishing the longer the student attended the instructional program. All six participants over the age of 25 cited anxiety due to their age, questioning their place in the program among so many younger students. The concern over age in the program seemed to also diminish over time.

The program design of the AHSP with its acceleration, subject-based cohorts, and tight-knit network of caring teachers and supportive counselors seemed to work in concert to address the three dimensions of social capital (structural, cognitive, and relational), ultimately supporting student persistence (Table 4).

Table 4. *Dimensions of Social Capital as they Relate to Research Participants*

Structural	Cognitive	Relational
Social Structure/Ties: 1. Peers (Learning Communities) 2. Teachers 3. Counselors 4. Family	*Shared Understandings:* 1. Shared Experiences 2. Shared Vision 3. Build Community	*Nature and Quality of Relationships:* 1. Trust (Teacher Compassion) 2. Family (Motivation) 3. High Expectational Climate 4. Learner Identity

The manner in which the findings of this study address the dimensions of social capital would suggest that each dimension works in concert to support learner persistence, and that the absence of one dimension may be result in student attrition. With this conceptual framework guiding program design to support learner persistence, it is possible that these findings could support future research efforts in the field of adult secondary education.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the interplay among social networks and learner persistence in adult secondary education. Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012) resulted in participants that attend an adult secondary education program located at a Southeast San Diego campus, and specifically, participate in the accelerated, learning cohort-model, "Adult High School Program." Data were analyzed to explore peer relationships, as well as meaningful relationships with key institutional figures (counselors and teachers) and family members that students self-selected as having impacted their own persistence in the program (Spina & Stanton-Salazar, 2008). The aim of this research was to provide a foundational study on the possible relationship between social network structure in adult secondary education and student persistence. The hope is that this study will act as a springboard for future research in this area, and ultimately, inform program design in adult secondary education to address mechanisms needed to support increased student outcomes.

Summary of Key Findings

1. What social ties (e.g. peers, teachers, counselors, family) support adult secondary education (ASE) student persistence?

Data from the interviews provided rich narrative details into not only which social ties support adult secondary education student persistence, but also how. There were four main groups that emerged from the narrative data: Counselors, Peers, Teachers, and Family. Interviewees cited counselors as integral in easing anxiety, specifically during the intake process. This is important; as many of the interviewees discussed a link to anxiety and attrition in past

academic experiences, and felt similar feelings emerged at the onset of their new program in adult education. Interviewees also provided qualitative data that supported peers as being incredibly impactful to persistence through shared experiences (which increase comfortability and provide motivation), as well as through supportive classroom community (having peer groups that will support one academically, but also emotionally). The participants cited teachers as being important to persistence by showing compassion (important because many interviewees eluded to past negative interactions with teachers that students perceived as lacking empathy), and creating a climate of high expectations. Finally, interviewees cited family as being extremely important in driving motivation, specifically as inspiration for them to make them proud by gaining their high school diploma after so much time had elapsed or due to past educational experiences that had not been successful).

In addition to specific social ties that supported student persistence, three themes emerged from the data that were categorized as 'programmatic factors that impacted persistence." These included acceleration, relevant curriculum, and increased confidence and social skills. The six-week accelerated session was cited by many as a motivating factor to persist, as was the relevancy of the curriculum. Participants discussed how many of the academic and interpersonal skills developed while in the program, have not only lent to persistence, but have increased their confidence outside of the program as well.

2. Does the adult secondary education (ASE) network vary by specific characteristics of the students (e.g. low-income, minority, or some combination of these characteristics)?

Despite specific characteristics, all interviewees discussed the importance that family played in their pursuit of a high school diploma. Age was the one specific characteristic that

emerged from the narrative data that seemed to serve as a motivating factor, primarily because interviewees expressed a growing desire to make their family proud of them.

3. What is the structure (e.g. size and density) of the social network among adult secondary education (ASE) students?

The structure of the social network among the participants was measured by utilizing a concentric circles activity, in which interviewees ranked social alters that were most influential to their persistence in the program. There were 51 total responses (N=51) among the participants. Of those responses, seven categories emerged: Teachers/Counselors, Classmates, Parents, Siblings, Spouse/Significant Other, Children, and Outside Friend. The highest ranked alter was 'Parents' at 31.37%. Narrative responses supported this finding, and cited parents as being highly influential on student motivation, specifically in the students' desire to make their parents proud of them (via academic achievement). Two categories tied for the second highest-ranked supports: Teachers/Counselors and Siblings. Narrative responses supported this finding in that participants cited Teachers/Counselors helped to ease anxiety, created a caring environment in which students felt comfortable seeking assistance from any team teacher, and by providing a climate in which students felt there were high expectations, but in which they were developing the skills to meet those expectations.

Connections to the Literature and Theory

When discussing social networks of students, one must return to the origins of social capital theory. In the seminal 1986 work, *The Forms of Capital,* Bourdieu contends that there are various types of capital (social, economic, and cultural), shaped by a person's *habitus* (the real and potential capital one brings to specific sub-spaces called *fields*). People develop their capital

through interactions with family, and also with people and groups outside of the home (like work, school, church, clubs, sports, etcetera). These increasing interactions play an important role, teaching people how to understand norms and acceptable behaviors. These *fields* that Bourdieu coined, have evolved into what we would today refer to as *networks*. Harvard Sociologist, Putnam (2000), further developed Bourdieu's work to express the importance between trust and reciprocity in these networks. Lin (2008) then applied the theory to an academic context, exploring student success networks. Jensen & Jetten (2015) then overlaid social capital theory with academic identity, asserting that a student's sense of belonging is critical to student success. All of these researchers agreed that social capital is not static; there is always potential to develop one's network, and by extension, access to a growing base of knowledge and resources.

Research has shown that minority students are often at an academic disadvantage due to a lack of social capital (Simmons, 2011). This research study interviewed fourteen adult secondary education students; based on ethnicity, all of the participants are considered minorities. Therefore, it is important to determine not only the size and structure of their networks (which would impact their access to knowledge and resources, but also the diversity and quality of the ties within that network to begin to gauge one's ability to leverage those resources. This research study sought to better understand those networks and highlight both prominent ties, and areas of weakness that could be developed. Findings of this study highlighted a concentrated network, offering a strong, but small network of support for participants. Moreover, this network offered opportunities for bonding within the program, but may have limited access to bridging with ties outside of the network; ultimately, limiting knowledge and resources that could benefit students as they progress academically and pursue the next step in the educational journey.

Any discussion of social capital cease to exists if it doesn't consider the role of cultural capital. Bourdieu designated three categories of cultural capital: 1) embodied, 2) objectified, and 3) institutionalized. Low-income students generally start-off with a lower amount of cultural capital, specifically in the embodied state. They are less likely to have certain knowledge comparative to their more affluent counterparts, specifically academic knowledge or societally acceptable norms and behaviors. The lack of specific knowledge that would benefit the low-income student begins to materialize as academic disadvantage in the objectified state. Low-income students are less likely to excel academically due to academic gaps and oftentimes, challenging behavior in the classroom. Consequently, students will find themselves in remedial courses, without an opportunity to take Honors or AP courses, or even courses required that are deemed "college track." The narrow *habitus* of these students ultimately materializes as a lack of access when one looks at institutionalized cultural capital, specifically as it relates to access to higher education, and later career networks. A limited resource of cultural capital restricts opportunities, resources, and knowledge for students (specifically, low income students).

When applying this lens of limited cultural capital to the adult secondary education students, specifically those in this study, one might conclude that students are at an enormous disadvantage because they lack cultural capital. However, when shifting this deficit mindset to an equitable mindset, there is the opportunity to see this student population as the owners of a large resource of potential capital, based on their accumulation of embodied cultural capital. A majority of the research participants discussed the importance of family serving as a motivator, and thus positively impacting student persistence. Furthermore, all participants discussed the importance of peers and institutional agents as integral to their support network of persistence in their academic program. With this in mind, researchers can begin to view family involvement in

adult education as a potential asset to the accumulation of cultural, (and by extension) social capital.

Implications for Practice

Student Services. Participants from the study repeatedly expressed feelings of angst during the intake process of assessment and orientation. For many adult education students, academic experiences in traditional high school have been negative, and with each credit they failed, they would fall further and further behind with a growing unlikelihood of being successful. When crafting the design of an adult education program, institutions should be mindful of addressing the socio-emotional needs of their students as a significant portion of the intake process. The research from this study highlighted an overwhelming feeling of anxiety on the part of new students – to the point of near attrition. It is unsurprising that as adult students, they turn to a comfortable response in uncomfortable settings, hence the need for a warm and supportive in-take process.

Because the intake process is the first chance for an institution to interact directly with new students, it is imperative that the experience be positive and build a connection that will support student persistence – and at the very least, make students want to come back to attend the first day of class. One practical implication of the study was to find mechanisms that would ease students' nerves and help them feel comfortable. Two possible, practical responses include a) providing a pre-orientation video that students can watch to help them become more familiar with the intake process before they show up to the institution, and b) have continuing students serve as "student ambassadors" to ease nerves of new students and share their experiences or similar feelings of angst and how they overcame them.

Another concern stemming from this study is the awareness of student anxiety on the part of counselors. The topic of anxiety was mentioned by every participant; therefore, seems to be an issue that needs to be strategically addressed and prioritized when designing the intake process. One possibility would be to incorporate an activity that allows students to discuss their feelings at the time of the orientation, while addressing previous experiences, as well as hopes and goals in their current academic endeavors. This finding would seem to echo the research that calls for counselor support in an academic and non-academic context (McDonnell, Soricone, & Sheen, 2014). Counselors wear many hats; that of academic advisor when providing class schedules and college guidance, but also as emotional support when students undergo increased amounts of stress. It is important that counselors provide ongoing training and support with regards to how they can best provide wrap-around services to support student persistence.

Instructional. There were several implications of this study on the instructional side. First, teacher compassion was a primary theme that students highlighted as important to feeling comfortable, confident, and that positively impacted persistence within the program. Several comments made by participants about the surprise of how much the teachers in the program cared alluded to incongruent interactions with teachers in the past. Furthermore, as students underscored the importance of teacher compassion – which can only occur through interactions – it is important to stress the impact that program design can have in promoting or inhibiting these types of interactions. In an independent study format, which is largely the norm in adult education, there exists limited opportunity for teachers to connect with students and demonstrate a caring, compassionate attitude. A program structured like the AHSP, with its high-density network of support through learning communities, multiple teachers that are accessible, and in-center counselor support, presents growing opportunities for teachers and students to build

meaningful relationships. Therefore, the primary instructional implication of this study is to craft a program design that allows for abundant increased interactions between peer-to-peer, student-teacher, student-counselor, and teacher-counselor.

A secondary instructional implication of this study, acceleration, is also related to program design. Several participants stressed the importance of the 6-week schedule, and how that kept them on-track and motivated to persist. This component supports recent research in higher education, specifically with regards to statewide initiatives supporting acceleration, like the California Acceleration Project (CAP). Best practices supported by CAP include creating learning communities, concentrating and accelerating courses, and providing curriculum that incorporates remedial skills in a higher-level content class (Hern & Snell, 2013). Higher education has found these components to be successful in supporting student engagement and by extension, persistence – as did the findings of this research. With similar findings in two settings related to adult education (higher education and adult secondary education), it seems fitting to further investigate instructional schedules and experiment with different versions of acceleration and measure resulting outcomes related to persistence.

In addition to growing support networks in the classroom, there was a void in discussion surrounding additional opportunities to expand student networks on campus. Interviewees did not discuss any participation in on-campus clubs or extracurricular activities. While student involvement in campus clubs is prominent in higher education, as is often included in first-year college programs, it seemed nearly non-existent in the context of adult secondary education. This seems like a starting point for student to bridge social capital – that is, to gain exposure to new (or weaker) ties that could offer and access point to new knowledge and resources (Portes, 1998).

Adult education could look to their higher education counterparts, and replicate successful clubs, mentorships, college ambassadorships, and internships.

Leadership. This study provided a lens into the multiple barriers that impact adult secondary education learner persistence. From a leadership perspective, it offers a fundamental understanding of barriers to persistence, while also offering an exciting opportunity to apply a social capital lens to better understand networks in adult education and reduce the prevalence of attrition.

While social capital theory and social network analysis (SNA) have gained traction in K-12 and higher education research, they have not been applied to an adult education context. This study suggests that understanding the various dimensions of social capital as they relate to adult education students could serve leadership in a program design capacity. Furthermore, an increased appreciation of the role that cultural capital specifically plays in an adult education context can shift the deficit mindset that has pervaded the realm of adult education to that of an equitable mindset, and specifically as an asset to adult learners.

Leaders in adult education have an exciting opportunity to explore the various networks that make up their academic programs on a variety of continuums. Understanding internal and external student networks will provide relational or structural network data to help those in leadership positions spot areas for linking and bridging capital. Studying persistence rates with variable program designs, such as accelerated models like 6 formats versus the traditional 18-week formats will help faculty and administration alike to establish the most effective program for adult education students.

Limitations of Study

Generalizability and Positionality. The sample size of this study was relatively small (14 participants) and selected only from one adult education program, from one community college district. Due to the small scale and nature of this study (unique program design), it will be difficult to generalize the findings to larger populations. The results are meant to provide a snapshot of the structure, size and composition of a specific adult secondary education program, while providing a lens into how that structure may affect student behavior, specifically persistence.

Although the site was purposefully selected due to the structured nature of the program, a larger data sample from multiple programs could offer greater generalizability. As a co-designer of the program researched, there could be positionality concerns; however, transparency was a priority in this study, and efforts were taken to inform students of the researcher's role in the invitation email. It's possible that the familiar face of the researcher actually added to the comfortability of the interview process, as many interviewees seemed willing and excited to participate.

Recommendations for Future Research

The focus for future research should be centered on what institutions can do to improve learner persistence, as this is one component among the multiple barriers that can be controlled through policy and practice. More current empirical research is needed, as most research was conducted in the 1990s – early 2000. Research has identified learner persistence to be a significant problem in the American adult education system. A 1992 study suggests that this phenomenon is not unique to the United States – it found that out of 1218 students, close to half of them separated from the program before completing six weeks, with 30% attrition in the

critical first three weeks (Comings et al., 1999). A current international comparative study of learner persistence rates and associated barriers could offer a unique perspective to an ongoing problem.

Future research could benefit from investigating the program models that have strategically addressed barriers related to student persistence. Ideally the research would identify adult education programs that have taken a holistic approach to meeting the needs of their student body; those that consider the importance of student services or counseling (intake, orientation, goal-setting, and ongoing support), instructional components (engaging and relevant curriculum, as well as teacher immediacy), and peer support networks.

Further research and an impetus to create strong consortiums of practitioners and scholars (similar to NCSALL) could offer a promising approach to influencing adult education policy. On a macro-level, adult education policy could be shaped through more in-depth research by the generation of a statewide strategic plan. This would encourage collaboration across adult education institutions, as well as open discussion regarding mechanisms for data collection. A more uniformed data collection system would provide a springboard for programmatic decisions based on demand, steer funding decisions, and would highlight more effective programs to serve as model exemplars.

On a micro-level, analyzing the social networks of adult education students through social network analysis could help distinguish the relationship between peer networks and persistence/outcomes. Because social network analysis provides a unique set of mathematical tools to formally assess network structure and proximity, it allows for a measurement of strength and distribution of ties between alters. This visual snapshot can provide valuable insight into how actors may influence each other, or in the context of an educational program (such as the

ASHP), how the learning community and support system work in tandem (or at odds). It could hold the key to peer communication and behavior trends influencing persistence, thus offering valuable insight into adult education programmatic and policy decisions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate Email

Dear Students:

My name is Holly Rodriquez, and I am an instructor in the Accelerated High School Program at the Educational Cultural Complex (ECC). As a student in the Doctorate of Education Program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), I am conducting research on what types of student support systems best help students to successfully complete their diploma.

In particular, this study seeks to learn more about the friends, relatives, teachers, mentors, and activities that support San Diego Continuing Education students in the process of completing their high school diploma. You have been identified as a student who participates in the Accelerated High School Program through San Diego Continuing Education.

I am particularly interested in whom you communicate with regards to your current educational progress and plans, how often you discuss your education and the nature of these conversations. My hope is that the findings of this study will help us to better understand and facilitate the successful completion of the program for every student.

This study asks participants to be interviewed by me one-time, for no more than 1 hour. Participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. There are no negative consequences if you decide not to participate and you may exit the interview at any time.

By participating in the interview you are agreeing for your answers to be used in the research. Your answers are strictly confidential and will not be shared.

This study has been approved by the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) Institutional Review Board (IRB).

If you would like to participate in this study, please email me directly at hlrodriq@sdccd.edu to express your interest. I will then follow up with you directly.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Holly Rodriquez
ABE/ASE Assoc. Professor
San Diego Continuing Education
(619) 388-4837

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

University of California, San Diego
Consent to Act as a Research Subject

Social Networks and Adult Student Persistence

Who is conducting the study, why you have been asked to participate, how you were selected, and what is the approximate number of participants in the study?
Holly Rodriquez, Ed.D candidate, is conducting a research study to find out more about how relationships within the Accelerated High School Program impact student persistence. You have been asked to participate in this study because you currently attend the Accelerated High School Program at San Diego Continuing Education. There will be approximately 20 participants in this study.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to investigate, through interviews, adult student persistence as it relates to student relationships. It is anticipated that findings of this study will help shape future programmatic decisions within this program and/or institution, and provide for valuable insight into student support needs.

What will happen to you in this study and which procedures are standard of care and which are experimental?
If you agree to be in this study, the following will happen to you:

You will be interviewed individually. The (one-time) semi-structured, in-depth interview regarding your relationship with fellow students, teachers, counselors, and DSPS/TRACE support staff will take approximately one hour, and with your permission, will be audio taped and transcribed. You will be provided a transcript of the interview for checking and clarifying any information if you elect to do so.

How much time will each study procedure take, what is your total time commitment, and how long will the study last?
As previously stated, the one-on-one interviews will take approximately one hour. If you elect to receive a transcript of the interview, you will be provided one within 3 weeks, and invited to share any comments/revision/suggestions.

What risks are associated with this study?
Participation in this study may involve some added risks or discomforts. These include the following:

1. There is a potential for the loss of confidentiality in this study and feelings of discomfort, boredom, and/or fatigue. In addition, there may be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable. You will be informed of any significant risks should they arise in the course of the study.

Safeguards have been put in place to minimize any risk to you. Interviews will be restricted to one hour. You may end the interview at any time. Your interview data will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes. The audiotapes will be destroyed following final analysis no later than one year after the conclusion of the study. Pseudonyms for schools, districts, and teachers will be used to minimize the risk of identification. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcribed interview and to eliminate any comments or references you feel may be identifiable if you desire to do so. The recording may be stopped at any time when requested by the participant. The entire audiotape or portions of it will be erased upon request by the participant. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research records may be reviewed by the UCSD Institutional Review Board.

What are the alternatives to participating in this study?
The alternative to participation in this study is to not participate.

What benefits can be reasonably expected?
There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from participating this study. Because there are no financial incentives for participating in this study, there is likely little to no direct benefit to the participant. The investigator, however, may learn more about how relationships impact student persistence, and society may benefit from this knowledge.

Can you choose to not participate or withdraw from the study without penalty or loss of benefits?
Participation in research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions in an interview or on a questionnaire at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide that you no longer wish to continue in this study, you will be required to either call or email the researcher.

You will be told if any important new information is found during the course of this study that may affect your wanting to continue.

Can you be withdrawn from the study without your consent?
The PI may remove you from the study without your consent if the PI feels it is in your best interest or the best interest of the study. You may also be withdrawn from the study if you do not follow the instructions given you by the study personnel.

Will you be compensated for participating in this study?
No compensation will be given for participating in this study.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

Who can you call if you have questions?
Holly Rodriquez has explained this study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach Holly Rodriquez at (619) 341-1032.

You may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at 858-246-HRPP (858-246-4777) to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems.

Your Signature and Consent
You have received a copy of this consent document.

You agree to participate.

_____ _____
Subject's signature Date

**If oral consent or waiver of documented consent is requested, no signature line is needed

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. Why don't we start with how you came to be at this school?

To understand their experience it is important to get the story leading up to their participation in the Accelerated High School Program (AHSP). This question is not complete until we understand:

- If they disengaged from school and at what point.
- What they feel and have felt in the past about school.
- How they view the process that ended up with their participation in AHSP

Follow up questions might include:

How do you feel about the process?
Were you treated fairly?
How do you feel about school now? Did you ever feel differently?
What types of things prevented you from completing your high school diploma while in a traditional high school?

2. Now we're going to talk about your experiences here in the Accelerated High School Program. Let's talk about your very first point of contact with Student Services and/or the first time you spoke with a counselor. Can you tell me about that experience?

3. Did you feel welcomed at Student Services and with the counselor? If so, how did they make you feel welcomed as a new student at Continuing Education?

4. Do you feel like there were any difficulties or barriers in getting into the Accelerated High School Program and starting the program?

5. Did you feel like you received proper support to overcome those barriers (and if so, who helped you and how)?

6. Now we're going to talk about your experiences in the classroom. Can you talk about how you felt on your first day of class?

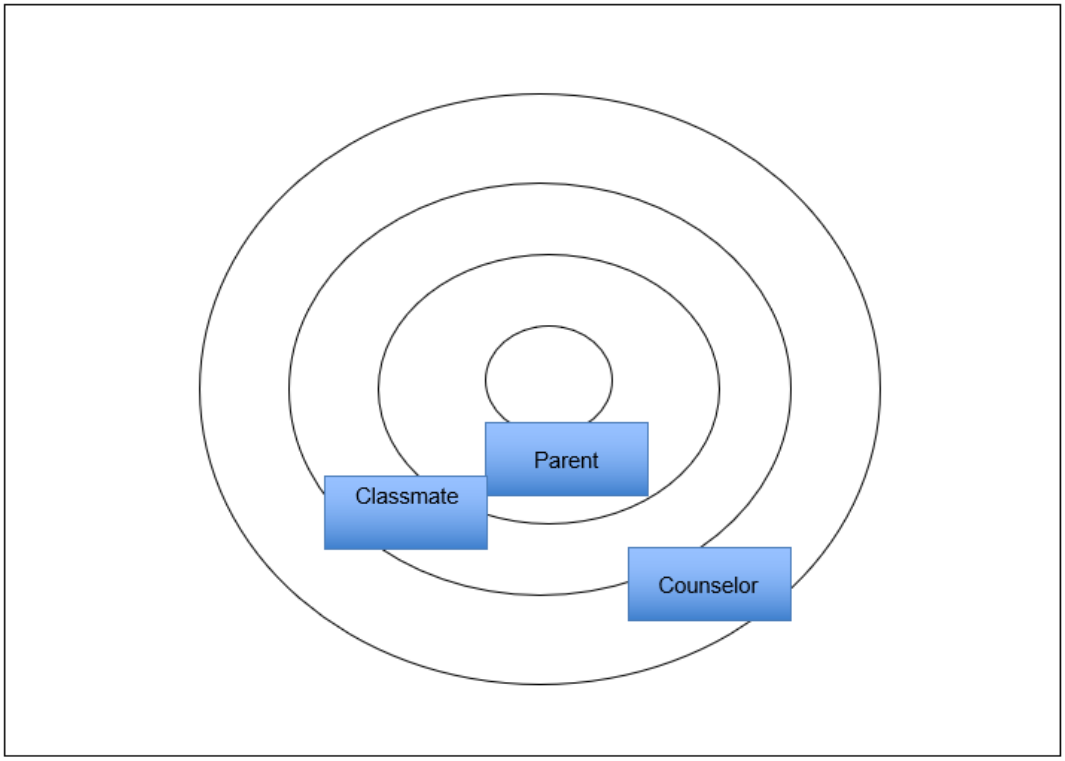
7. Now can you describe what types of interactions you had on that first day (perhaps with a new teacher, staff, or other students)? Do you remember any meaningful interactions (positive or negative)?

8. Now I want you to take a step back and look at your experience in the Accelerated High School Program as a whole. How would you summarize your experiences here?

9. Do you see yourself as a successful student in this program, why or why not?

10. To what degree, if any, do you feel the role of relationships impacts your persistence in this program?
Want to identify not only people that have supported/inhibited persistence, but also how.

11. Lets talk about people who have had a big impact on you persisting in this program. I have this board here with concentric circles on it, and I would like for you to rate the impact that each person (that you previously mentioned) has had on you persisting in this program. The center circle will represent the relationship that has had the greatest impact, and we will work our way out.
(show board and have tags with roles such as: peer (classmate or external), parent, sibling, counselor, teacher, etc...) Example shown below...



12. Now that we have identified some key relationships, would you like to expand on any of those? Can you tell me specifically how these individuals have helped you?

13. Are there any other factors within the program that impact your persistence in the Accelerated High School Program?